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Teacher Research: Learning to Listen

by Jennifer Moore

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When friends from out of town visit, I often take them jogging around my hometown. I have routes I have run hundreds of times; they are so familiar, I run as if on automatic pilot. I seem to forget, though, that my guest has no idea that this is where I turn left, and that is the place where I cross the street to run on the other side. On more than one occasion, I have nudged a friend off the sidewalk or run right into them in my single-minded routine. I forget to ask questions, to explain, to direct, to instruct. I forget that my friends are not mind-readers, and that they may already have a route in mind. I forget that my running partner is peering around at unfamiliar sights, unaware of where we are heading and when we will finish. I forget to think outside of myself, and I have learned this year that I sometimes practice the same habits in my classroom.

I made the decision last spring to seek a position teaching high school English. After participating in the San Diego Area Writing Project Invitational Institute and implementing Writer's Workshop in my 7th grade Humanities classroom, I found that my passion for writing was leading me away from social studies. I was ready for a change and thought, *if this is the what 7th graders can do, imagine the writing that more experienced students will produce*. I longed to experience the kind of repartee I enjoyed with my SDAWP fellows, reading and writing literature and giving one another honest, helpful feedback. Professional readings such as Barry Lane's *After the End* and Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle* reinforced the notion that students at any level were capable of engaging in deep and meaningful conversations about their writing. I knew this because my seventh graders had mastered peer response, both in editing one another's work and in responding to pieces read aloud. We had held a poetry reading in a local café, with the success of the event fueled by my students' enthusiasm, intensity, and pride in their work. I assumed that 12th graders in a creative writing class were *already* creative writers and that if I provided the structure, their writing would drive the class. I was unprepared for the contrast between what I expected and who the students *were*. Fortunately, I would use this class as the basis for my first foray into teacher research. Although my original intent was to study my students' writing practices, my research shifted to my own ways of engaging with students. I learned about listening, asking questions, and planning the "running" route of instruction together with my students—lessons that can be applied to anyone making the transition between grade levels—or countries, or faculties, for that matter.

I came to school that September with my arms and bookbags full of assumptions about the older students I would be teaching in my new job. Based on my experience with middle-level students, I expected my students to be even more genuine, enthusiastic writers, who were enrolled in the class to write deep pieces and to help one another grow as artists. I assumed each student would have his or her own goals for growth in writing: some of them would be playwrights, I imagined, some would be poets. I set a structure for my class around two assignments per week: one "new"

process piece, and one rewritten one, which would be thoroughly edited by peers and the instructor and finally revised by the student. I created daily writing prompts around the first six-week unit on "Memoir," but I allowed students the freedom to interpret the final project in their own ways. I was confident that I had created an environment with just the right blend of structure and autonomy, and quickly established and introduced my system to the class.

During our first extended block period, after collecting students' writing pieces, I informed them we would be responding to one another's work, applying the tried-and-true procedure I had used in middle school to my high school course. I advised them that I would randomly pass out the writing pieces and that students would respond and return edited pieces to a designated pile to trade for another. Students who wished to share publicly would have the opportunity to do so during the "Author's Chair" period near the end of class. This was the general system my seventh graders had internalized. During a typical "workshop," they would read and respond to three or four peers' pieces and then resume their own writing.

On this first day of Writer's Workshop in my senior class, widespread panic in the form of sputtering protests and shocked and uncomfortable expressions erupted in my classroom. Sarah, who had introduced herself on the first day and asserted both her enthusiasm for writing and her wariness of my ability to nurture her talents, piped up: "Last year, we had 'Open Easel.' We liked it that way, didn't we? Can't we do it the way we've always done it?" I asked for a definition of this system of peer response. "Open Easel is where we push the chairs back and sit in a circle on the floor, and we just go around and whoever wants to share, does, and we give them feedback."

I was a little concerned with the "mushiness" of this approach, since my goal was for my students to have extensive feedback on their writing, but I was also very eager to demonstrate my willingness to compromise and value their judgment. I agreed that we would use Open Easel as our main mode of responding to one another's writing. It soon became clear that while this model of peer response was comfortable for them, it had its own limitations. Invariably, the same students shared, and the same students expressed frustration that they weren't getting the constructive, in-depth feedback they wanted. I bit my tongue to avoid imparting a sense of "I told you so" and to avoid steering them ungracefully in an entirely new direction. In unilaterally imposing my own structure on this group of wise and mature students and then eagerly compromising to avoid conflict with them, I learned valuable lessons about making assumptions. I had assumed the students would readily adapt to my ideas of how a writing class should work, and then I assumed that I couldn't negotiate with them. I had lost an opportunity in the first week or two to share my goals with the class and ask them about their preferences and ideas for peer response. There was a middle ground between their comfort zone and my curricular goals and I had to back up and find it. Lingering frustration with our system of peer response led me to formulate my teacher research question around how to help my students invest in their writing and seek to improve, revise, and expand on their first drafts.

I was nervous about my new position and how I would be viewed and treated by my students. I was accustomed to teaching middle school students. They were independent thinkers and diverse personalities, but my authority and role as facilitator was rarely disputed. Twelfth graders, I worried, were not only closer to my own age, but were capable of seeing me as a peer with questionable authority, or paradoxically, as someone who was naïve or unsympathetic to their

concerns. I was preoccupied with establishing the right balance. My way of assuring them I was a considerate listener with open lines of communication and a fair instructor who acknowledged students' individuality was to give them an extensive sheet of introductory questions concerning their backgrounds, goals, and concerns, and I responded to each student individually. My way of assuring myself that there was no room for chaos or *coup d'etat* was to hit the ground running, keeping them busy within my comforting framework. My own insecurity about my place in the classroom led me to ignore theirs; perhaps I was more concerned about the class working for me than for them. Rather than listen carefully to my students, their interactions, and reactions, I kept them at a distance while changing modalities whenever there was a complaint. The true character of my students and the class was made known to me only gradually. But when I slowed down and truly thought about what I had observed and learned from my students individually, I reconsidered my format of instruction and my personal goals for their collective achievement.

Unlike a seventh grade humanities class, which represents a cross-section of seventh graders irrespective of ability, creative writing at our high school is an *elective* English class. I assumed this meant that only students who truly loved creative writing would take the course. It took me several weeks to discover that some of my students had never written freely or in a "creative," non-expository genre, and furthermore, a handful of students did not really care for writing at all. Some of the more dedicated writers intimated to me that the creative writing class was viewed by many as an "easy" alternative to 12th grade English. My students ranged from Allan, who was struggling with organization and basic grammar and preferred word art to narrative writing; to Anna, a student learning English as her second language whose poetry featured rich vocabulary and complicated syntax that often obscured meaning. Allan admitted that this was his "fun class," and used workshop time to do homework for other classes. Anna would return to my room several times a day with drafts of her poems. I had expected a classroom of Annas, but I reminded myself that it was my responsibility to teach students whatever their writing skills or interests. Maybe my goal would be to inspire a love of writing in those students who lacked it, while continuing to encourage and develop the ardent young writers in my classroom.

In my effort to transform my students with a half-hearted interest in writing and value their efforts, I took each piece of writing turned in by my students very seriously-more seriously, I discovered, than they often did, and this presented a whole host of new problems between me and my charges. When I returned the first batches of writing pieces with extensive feedback, I was amazed by the range of reactions to my suggestions. While I believed my responses were thoughtful and encouraging, to many students, the sheer breadth of coverage of their work was intimidating and even hurtful. Some shared that editing marks on their essays in other English classes were understandable, and were not viewed as quite so *personal*. A good many of my students expected that their very heartfelt creative writing was not to be "messed with" or judged. It represented their *thoughts*-how could one revise feelings?? My internal answer was, *but your deep thoughts have grammatical errors and clichés!! Surely you can state that in a way that better captures your true sentiments!* Overheard in my classroom on more than one occasion were students muttering, "But I *liked* it that way." While some of them, like Anna, greatly appreciated my attention to her writing ("No teacher has ever asked me to work on my writing-I think they were afraid to say they didn't understand it!"), others, like Lisa, developed a sense that I didn't like them, and that creative writing was a chore. I didn't even think about the fact that Rebecca, a student receiving Special Education services, might be sensitive to my corrections of

her grammatical errors. My fears of being "in front" of the class meant that I was dedicating more to responding to their writing *as it was* than to nurturing the process. They knew that their writing was, in effect, the curriculum, and felt incredible pressure to perform. Some simply gave up.

It wasn't until the middle of the second grading period that I acknowledged the tension between the students and myself and among the students themselves. One thing I had prided myself on in the past was my ability to build and maintain a close-knit community of learners in my seventh grade classroom-students recognized our class as a safe haven, free for the most part from name-calling and teasing. But my high school class and some of their deep-rooted convictions called for greater measures than "can't we all just get along?" Sarah and her School of the Arts cohort were vocally liberal, and I had several conservative, fundamentalist Christians in the class as well. Not only did they have trouble respecting one another's views, negative comments about one another's writing ("I just can't relate to stuff about God," "Your piece makes me personally uncomfortable") had been heard in the classroom.

When an argument about religion erupted in the classroom one day I realized there were multiple issues in the class that were begging for attention. One student fled the classroom in tears, and the remaining students and I discussed what was happening in our class. Students shared a variety of observations. They noted that groups in our class had been allowed to segregate themselves from one another because of the free seating arrangement. They pointed out that there had been very few community-building activities at the beginning of the year, and the "ice" had never really been broken. In return, I shared some of the insecurities and fears I had about teaching high school, being fair, and achieving what I considered my job to be-teaching and encouraging creative writing. After students aired their feelings, I understood that it was important for me to consider new ways of fostering community, as well as new ways of responding to students' writing and teaching writing itself, and that it wasn't too late to do so. Suddenly my research was not focused on revision and my students' approach to their writing. The real question needing to be answered was about how *I* was relating to my students and to their writing-and how they were responding to *me*.

I brought very little data to my next Teacher Research group meeting. The research on revision practices among my students had, quite honestly, been sidelined by more immediate issues of classroom community. It was at this meeting, when I shared some of the things I had learned anecdotally from my students about the role of the writing instructor, that I understood that teacher research was not always about studying students specifically. In this case, I could learn more by studying my own behavior and how it impacted achievement in my classroom. I drafted another extensive mid-term student survey (see Appendix), encouraging everyone to be honest and direct about their feelings about the class, themselves as writers, the instructor, and each other. I read these surveys with the careful attention I should have given my students from the beginning. This idea of inquiring-of probing students for their concerns, personalities, and ideas about writing and response-struck me as the most vital aspect of building community and curriculum in a writing class. Rather than, say, stepping out of the house with running shoes on and embarking on the pre-planned route, I recognized the value of trust and collaboration: *How far do you see us running today? Would you like to run on the sand or the sidewalk?*

The next step was negotiation. I learned from the surveys that while some students were looking for more instruction, others were seeking the freedom to explore their own styles and genres. Through discussions about their responses to my questions, we decided together that my prompts and writing ideas were guides, options that some students would rely on and from which others would pick and choose. We both agreed that I was assigning too many pieces meant to adhere to strict categories (there were times when students were more interested in creating a new piece than in revising an old one), but that revision and re-writes would still be required. Students wanted to retain Open Easel-even those who said they were never comfortable sharing aloud. Since I felt that every student should receive peer feedback and that oral response as the only method was limiting, I told students I wanted to resume the trading of papers for written feedback. Students suggested that authors could indicate to editors at the bottom of papers what kind of feedback they were seeking-grammatical, structural, etc., in order to maintain some control and safety. This kind of give-and-take allowed us to implement aspects of Writing Workshop that I felt were non-negotiable while students felt assured that their concerns were being heard. There continued to be students with whom I worked individually, those who wished to exceed the expectations of the requirements, and those whose devised projects did not conform to the assignments.

Some students found my feedback on their papers to be utterly necessary for their growth as writers, and a few, like Lisa, shared that they felt "attacked and criticized." In our discussions about response, I realized that I had begun to think I was not doing my job if I were not delivering in-depth feedback on each and every piece of writing turned in by my students. Students honestly admitted that "rubber stamp" approval of their writing from time to time actually motivated them to spend more time on pieces with more extensive feedback; they were confident, then, that some of their work was already "perfect." I recognized that my goal did not have to be to transform each student in my class into a deep and meaningful writer, but that I could concentrate more on nurturing their love and comfort with writing. Sometimes that meant actually letting go of criticism, allowing opportunities for "pride of ownership" to happen. Not every piece of writing requires overhauling-and some students were going to take their writing further than others. I discovered that, in terms of running/writing partners, meeting their needs was ultimately more important than finishing the four-mile run I imagined. *If you're tired at any point and need to walk, let me know, but if you're willing, I will push you farther.*

Finally, as I relaxed the reins and allowed more dialogue among students as well as between myself and students in the classroom, I could sense all of us growing more comfortable with each other and with writing. When there was extra time remaining in a class session, I would ask for "state of the union" addresses, and more students expressed enthusiasm for the class and their writing. Students who were frustrated felt more comfortable consulting me, and there were no conflicts between students during the second semester. Control is often a teacher's tool to ward off chaos, and once my fears of anarchy were allayed, I could revel in my students' ability to ask for time to write, time to share, and time to take a break, without seeing those requests as threats to my curricular goals or signs that I was a "pushover." I also learned that by 12th grade, I could not undo years of resentment and suspicion between groups and individual students; my students were not necessarily going to learn to love one another. I could, however, help them practice separating personal and academic camaraderie and foster ways of helping one another with their writing despite personal and ideological differences.

By the end of the year I observed more students investing in their writing through revision and experimentation with different styles and genres. Although my teacher research was no longer based on revision, I saw a rise in both the number of students rewriting draft pieces, and the number of times students revised individual pieces. The students' final projects, collections of writings about the high school experience, were completed at a time when students are typically distracted by end-of-year activities and graduation. The projects represented students' dedication to the writing process (every piece had been revised) and demonstrated that most students understood and appreciated the value of writing as a form of creative and individual expression-my ultimate goal for them.

Luckily, I recognized that my initial "one-size-fits-all" approach would alienate students before I took it too far, though not every student thoroughly enjoyed the class and grew tremendously as a writer. I have come to recognize that this is not a requirement for success as a teacher. I needed to acknowledge students beyond their writing and English personae-they are students who write but do other things as well. Although we are in the business of student growth and achievement, I learned that these are harder to measure in the realm of creative writing, and have much to do with the psychological and social state of each student. Teachers who communicate with students only through the medium of their subject area risk losing an opportunity to connect with students whose talents are not in that particular area. I would like my students to feel, instead of "Miss Moore and I just finished a 10-mile run, and boy, do I need a break from running," that "We went running, and talked, and it was hard, and it felt good, and you know, I just might go for a jog on my own now!"

One of the most exciting aspects of teacher research is that it helped me focus on the vital questions related to my instructional practices. Through the intense introspection involved in teacher research, I had, in effect, invited myself to be videotaped running students off the road. While my initial goal in allowing for that close examination of my practice may have been to critique student stride or speed, I wound up recognizing how my own actions and pedagogical methods affected their results and feelings about the run itself. Writing about the experience has deepened my understanding of my role in my students' learning and how to apply what I have learned to this year's team of "runners." A teacher researcher is a listener-someone actively engaged in making new discoveries about her students, her teaching and herself. In my first year of this process, I learned that listening is, indeed, the most important part.

Appendix

October 27, 2000

Dear Creative Writers,

We are eight weeks into the year but have a long way to go, and I thought this might be a good time for reflection. Everyone has an aspect of his/her life that is challenging, and in my job, this class is it. This is my first time teaching creative writing, and my first time teaching 12th graders. I think there are still some "kinks" to work out. And there is no one whose thoughts matter more to me than yours. I would like to give you this opportunity to **honestly assess the class**. I do not want you to be worried about your feedback affecting your grade or my feelings about you; respond anonymously if you prefer. I need to hear from **you** to be the best teacher possible for

ALL students. And the class can only meet your needs if you express them. Be as honest and specific as you can.

1. Rank the following reasons for taking this class, in terms of their influence on your decision to sign up (1=greatest reason; 6=least important reason for taking Creative Writing). Be honest!!

- ____ I took the class last year and automatically signed up
- ____ I am already a "creative writer" and this is a chance to improve my skills
- ____ I thought it might be easier than regular English
- ____ I haven't done particularly well in "typical" English classes and want an alternative
- ____ I need English credit
- ____ I haven't done much creative writing and want to explore that side of myself (try it out)
- ____ other: _____

2. Given your responses above, to what extent is the class meeting your primary needs or expectations?

3. There are different motives for being in the class and different levels of participation. What challenges do you see us facing as a group? What appears to be a conflict/area of discomfort in the class?

4. Do you feel comfortable as a writer in this class? Why or why not?

5. Do you feel comfortable sharing/joining discussions in this class? Why or why not?

6. Do you feel supported by the instructor in this class? (Be brave, and be honest.)

7. Are the comments on your papers helpful to you as a writer? Are they too positive or too negative? Do you understand them? Do they damage your ego (I am serious here!)?

8. Do you feel supported by your peers in this class?

9. Do you feel comfortable with the grading structure of the class? Why or why not? Be specific.

10. Are the rubrics fair/helpful to good writing? What else should they include?

Comment on the format of the class:

11. What do you think about the six-week themes and projects so far?

12. What do you think about having 10-15 minutes set aside for writing at the beginning of each class?

13. What do you think about the weekly prompts? Are they helpful? Interesting? Too structured/not structured enough? Should I spend more time explaining them?

14. What do you think about the readings? Interesting? Too much? Should we read more? Should we read more novels together?
15. Do you find responding to the readings helpful? Interesting? Too free-form/not enough freedom? Do you think we should incorporate essays into this class? Why or why not?
16. What do you think about turning in a new piece each week? Is there enough direction?
17. What do you think about rewriting every week? Is it helping you create something "good"?
18. What do you think of in-class lessons and activities? Do I spend enough time on instruction, or should I do more whole-class activities?
19. What do you think about class discussions? Do I ask enough questions? How can I encourage people to participate, and ensure that more than a few voices are heard?
20. What do you think of Block Days/Open Easel? Is our format working for you? Why or why not? How could it be more comfortable as well as more helpful to your writing?
21. What other methods of peer and instructor response would you like to see implemented or tried out in this class?
22. What ideas do you have for this class? Help me make this a good class for you!
23. What do you need or want from me to become a better writer, or to feel better/more comfortable in my class?
24. What other comments do you have about me as a teacher or about the creative writing class?